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## TENSE-TERMINOLOGY OF THE GERMAN SUBJUNCTIVE

“In der indirekten Rede gebraucht man gewöhnlich dieselbe Zeitform, welche in der direkten Rede gebraucht wird. . . . Wenn aber diese Zeitform den Konjunktiv nicht zeigt, so ist es besser, das Imperfekt anstatt des Präsens zu gebrauchen (oder umgekehrt). . .

Er sagte, dass er gestern einen langen Spaziergang mache (machte).” When such flagrant mistakes as this occur in an otherwise excellent reference book for elementary German grammar, one wonders how it is possible so to misunderstand the comparatively simple rules of indirect discourse. My own experience has convinced me and I think this article will show that the difficulty is merely one of *terminology*. I claim no originality for any of the following remarks; they are in the main a result of my recent collaboration in the preparation of a report on introductory books, reference grammars, etc., for the Wisconsin Association of Modern Foreign Language Teachers, soon to appear in bulletin form. My purpose is merely to lay the facts clearly before the readers of the MLJ, naturally hoping to clarify the views of some and to get in return suggestions as to how the proposed terminology may be improved. It has been my experience, and I believe a great majority of teachers will agree with me, that the pupil has little trouble in learning the forms of the subjunctive and the use of those subjunctives employed in expressing unreality and the like; the great difficulty is found in the correct use of the forms in indirect discourse.

It has been the conventional thing to name the various “tenses” of the subjunctive after those tenses of the indicative to which they correspond in form. A word on the history of the German tenses is necessary here. The tenses were originally not expressions of time signification, but referred rather to the mode of action, whether it was continued, momentary, completed, or repeated. In historical times this primitive condition yielded to that which obtains to-day, namely, that the “tenses” signify time distinction. This change did not, however, take place in the subjunctive until much later than in the indicative. In the oldest dialects *wäre*, for instance, could refer to present, past, or future. Not until the

new periphrastic forms of the perfect and pluperfect gained general sway, did time differentiation of the subjunctive "tenses" take place and this not in a manner parallel to the indicative.

The difficulty encountered by pupils in the correct choice of tenses in indirect discourse is directly due to the traditional identification of the time significations of the subjunctive tenses with those of the indicative corresponding in form. From the standpoint of correspondence of form, this identification may have some justification, but if a *tense* is a "time-form" of a verb, this classification is untenable. The preterit subjunctive (I employ the usual terms) never refers to the past, the perfect and pluperfect do not express the relative time signification of the corresponding indicative forms, the present and perfect conditionals regularly do not occur in wenn-clauses, where we should expect them, and they always have a future implication. A natural result of this tense identification of corresponding indicative and subjunctive forms was the formulation of such rules as (I quote from elementary German grammars): "In indirect speech the present and past subjunctive are both used for time present or future with reference to the main verb," or "the preterit subjunctive is often used to represent present time in indirect discourse when the present tense does not sufficiently distinguish the mode. For this reason (! ! !) the preterit can not be used to represent statements that in direct speech were in past time, etc." or "Indirect discourse referring to the present is put in the present or in the imperfect subjunctive," etc.

That the nomenclature of the subjunctive is not satisfactory can be seen on the one hand in the scientific recognition of this inadequacy, as, for instance, when Wilmanns, *Deutsche Grammatik* II, p. 196, discusses Das Tempus des irrealen Opt. Prät., showing plainly that name and significance are not identical, and on the other hand in the more or less successful attempts of some of our more recent elementary German books to find names more accurately expressing the real "tense" of a form. The greater number of beginners' readers and grammars, of course, conform to the old system. In the following remarks I naturally treat only those which have departed from the beaten path.

Roehm, *Practical Beginning German*, Banta Publishing Co., 1916, calls the imperfect subjunctive *Erster Konjunktiv* and the

pluperfect subjunctive *Zweiter Konjunktiv* with no real reason, that I can see, for this choice, as these names in no way indicate tense, nor is there any basis, to my knowledge, for the statement that these terms are used in German. The present conditional he calls the *two-word imperfect subjunctive*, the perfect conditional the *conditional* or *periphrastic* form of the pluperfect subjunctive.

Grumann, *Practical German Lessons*, University Publishing Co., 1916, makes a similar distinction between imperfect and present conditional, pluperfect and perfect conditional, calling them *Imperfekt kurz* and *Imperfekt lang*, etc. Grumann emphasizes the idea of futurity implied in the conditionals, a point which is almost always lost sight of.

Curme, *A First German Grammar*, Oxford University Press, 1914, divides the subjunctive tenses into *principal tenses*, comprising the present and the compound tenses that contain a present auxiliary, i. e. the perfect, future, and future perfect, and the *historical tenses*, the past and pluperfect. "The different tenses within the same group mark different distinctions of time, but the tenses of one group as compared with those of the other group do not mark different distinctions of *time*, but differ only in the *manner* in which they represent the statement. The Principal Tenses indicate probability, the Historical Tenses indicate improbability or non-reality". The present conditional Curme designates as *periphrastic past*. (In his large *Grammar of the German Language*, Macmillan, 1905, he still speaks of the present and perfect of the conditional mood.)

A similar classification is found in Wilmanns, *Deutsche Schulgrammatik*, II. Teil, where the division is made into *Präsens- und Präteritalformen*. Wilmanns has three categories in which these forms appear: 1. present forms in a demand; 2. preterit forms in unreality; 3. present, preterit, or indicative forms in "Vorstellung," mainly indirect discourse. Since the "preterit" forms under 3 are used regularly only when the "present" forms are not clearly differentiated from the indicative, the first and third group may be merged. As far as the individual tenses are concerned, Curme and Wilmanns do not break away from the traditional terminology of the subjunctive.

Prokosch, *Introduction to German*, Holt and Co., 1911, also in his later books, *German for Beginners* and *Deutscher Lehrgang, Erstes*

*Jahr*, makes use of this division of the tenses into two large classes but goes further and rechristens the single tenses according to their time-meaning. (My colleague J. D. Deihl had evolved in his teaching practice a similar system independently of Prokosch).

A synopsis of the 3d person singular of *sein* will show Prokosch's new terminology:

	<i>I</i>	<i>II</i>
Present	er sei	er wäre
Past	er sei gewesen	er wäre gewesen
Future	er werde sein	er würde sein

Future Perfect er werde gewesen sein er würde gewesen sein

*Types I and II* are, of course, the equivalents of Curme's Principal and Historical Tenses and of Wilmanns' Präsens- und Präteritalformen. (Both Curme and Wilmanns classify the conditionals as preterit and pluperfect).

Neither Curme's nor Wilmanns' terms can well be applied to a single tense. *I* and *II*, to be sure, seem colorless terms; they are simply guideposts pointing out where the different forms are used, Type *I*, generally speaking, in indirect discourse, Type *II* in unreality and when the *I* forms are not clearly differentiated from the indicative. Such terms as "first present subjunctive," "second past subjunctive," etc., are good practical names, free from unwieldiness such as we would find, were we to attempt to combine in some way the new names of the single tenses with the appellations of the two larger groups into which Curme and Wilmanns divide them, as, for instance, a "historical past" or "preterit present," etc. The designation of *er wäre* as *II* Present, *er sei gewesen*, *er wäre gewesen* as *I* and *II* Past, expressing the general idea of past time without the relative connotation of preterit, perfect, and pluperfect, will appeal to those who are seeking a correspondence of name and significance. (A better designation for practical class purposes is, however, still a desideratum).

Objection might be raised to classifying the conditionals as *futures* and with a certain appearance of justification. I believe no one will seriously defend the name *conditional* for a form which is ordinarily not used in a condition. But it may be interposed that the *würde* forms would more properly belong in the present and past tenses, as they are used interchangeably with these in the

conclusion of conditional sentences. This objection is only partly valid, however. The conditionals always preserve something of their idea of futurity. The rule that they may not be used in the *wenn*-clauses is partly one of euphony, but it is in the nature of the case that the conclusion contains an idea relatively future to the condition. The future implication of *würde* forms can be seen clearly in such conditions where their use is justified, i. e. where a statement is designated as unreal and future.

"Warum sollte man nicht die Regierungen nach jeder Kriegserklärung vor Gericht stellen? Wenn nur die Völker das *begreifen würden*, wenn sie selbst die Gewalten, die sie zum Mord führen, dem Gericht *unterwerfen würden*, wenn sie sich *weigern würden*, . . . dann würde der Krieg ausgerottet." (This and the following examples from Wilmanns, *Deutsche Grammatik II*, p. 198 ff.)

The form is entirely justified in indirect conditions to designate a relative future: "Er sagte, wenn sie ihm sein Gut *verkaufen würden*, sei er ruiniert."

The future meaning is still clearer if we compare two sentences with *als ob*: "Es schien, als ob sie sich nicht *verstünden*", and "Es schien, als ob sie sich nie *verstehen würden*," and likewise in clauses subordinated to a negative: "Ich wüsste keinen, der das *täte* . . . , der das *tun würde*".

This view is further strengthened by the fact that the *würde* forms are not customary in a number of cases where the preterit and pluperfect subjunctive does not have a secondary future meaning. The chief instances are the following:

1. exceptive sentences.

"Die Nürnberger hängen keinen, sie hätten ihn denn" (contemporaneity).

2. statements with *fast* and *beinahe*.

"Er hätte mich beinahe überredet". Future meaning is usually prevented by the meaning of *beinahe* or *fast*. There is no difference in tense signification between "Er *hat* mich beinahe überredet" and "Er *hätte* mich beinahe überredet". The unreal condition implied by a preterit or perfect subjunctive in a statement is ordinarily precluded by the meaning of *beinahe* and *fast*. We may say, "Wenn nicht das und das eingetreten wäre, hätte er mich überredet", but hardly, "hätte er mich *beinahe* überredet". The

statement thus does not express time relatively future to that of a condition. (cf. Wilmanns, II, p. 229).

3. subjunctive of cautious statement.

"Ich wüsste nicht, dass ich ihm schon begegnet wäre".

4. deliberative subjunctive in such sentences as "Über den Berg wären wir".

5. wishes which do not expressly refer to the future.

"Wollte (oder möchte) es doch regnen".

In these cases the *würde* forms cannot ordinarily be substituted for the uncompound forms. The latter do not refer to the future in the sentences above.

I believe these examples show conclusively that there is always present in these forms at least an implication of futurity. Harris, *A German Grammar*, American Book Co., 1914, recognizes the future nature of the conditionals when he coins for them the terms *Past Future* and *Past Future Perfect*, "though neither these names nor present and perfect conditional are entirely satisfactory."

The classification introduced by Prokosch has been adopted by Morgan in his *Elementary German Syntax*, Holt and Co., 1916.

It seems to me that the system which Prokosch presents is by far the best which we have to-day. The terms *I* and *II* may be improved upon, perhaps also *Future* and *Future Perfect*, possibly some other points. The hope of furnishing a stimulus to some one to contribute to an even more satisfactory scheme was one of the incentives of this article.

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